

Inclusive Language:

The Final Report

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is extracted from the Final Report issued by the Elders' Task Force on Inclusive Language. It presents an overview of the cover letter, the Introduction and Preface to the Report, and the 15 main recommendations of the Task Force (some examples used to illustrate recommendations in the Report are deleted here in the interests of space). The Proposed Statement of Faith -- incorporating inclusive language -- is included in full; proposed changes from current wording are in italic type. Copies of the full Report are included in the Pre-conference packets for General Conference.

Report of INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE TASK FORCE

The Elders' Task Force On Inclusive Language was called into being at the June 1979 meeting of the Board of Elders. The establishment of the Task Force was presented to the 9th General Conference in the Elders' white paper and was approved by that conference.

The Task Force began work after the Los Angeles General Conference, over the phones and through the mail. Following the grass-roots model, input was requested from churches, districts, commissions, etcetera. We met in Washington D.C. from 21st to 25th July 1980 to draft our initial report. That report was circulated in October 1980 throughout the Fellowship for feedback. The various suggestions for revision were considered and this final report was drawn up at a meeting of the Task Force in Detroit in March of 1981. This report is being circulated for study and feedback in preparation for the General Conference in Houston.

The report will be voted on in two sections:

Section I: Recommendations 1 to 14 will require majority support for adoption as UFMCC's recommendations. (Please remember you are not voting to approve the examples. They are provided only in an attempt to clarify the recommendations.)

Section II: The recommended Bylaw changes require a 2/3 vote for adoption.

Thank you for your suggestions and support.

Reverend Brent Hawkes, Chairperson

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INTRODUCTION TO GUIDELINES

The Inclusive Language Task Force was created to deal with the issue of language. Language, however, is not so simple a matter as it might first appear. How we speak about something not only describes the experience, but often shapes and creates it. The power and significance of language, words, the word, was clearly understood by the authors of Scripture who identified the act of creation with God's Word, God's speaking. The imagery of God's interaction with humanity is consistently expressed in terms of God's Word or speaking. The early prohibition against uttering God's name was a recognition of the power that a name or word holds. Indeed God's delegating to humanity the authority to name the birds and animals was an act of empowerment. Thus, when we deal with language in general, and God language in particular, we are venturing into an area of the deepest significance, and it is important that we proceed with care and with caution.

At the same time, both the Biblical tradition and the history of the faith community reveal that the one constant in God language is that of change. And how could it be otherwise? For it is a living God whom we worship and respond to. Both as individuals and as communities our understanding and experience of this God grows as we grow, and growth inevitably brings change.

The Bible in its present form evolved over a period of many centuries. Beginning as stories of faith passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation, these stories were eventually written down and added to. Different generations of faith communities shaped, edited, and retold these stories in light of their own understanding and experience of God. Still other communities later on discussed and debated which stories and which versions would be included as scripture and which would not. (The fact that even today, the Jews, the Catholics, and the Protestants all have slightly different scriptures vividly demonstrates that different perspectives have led communities to different determinations of God's Word.)

It is not surprising then, that we, in our age, following the tradition of our forebears in the faith, are retelling and re-shaping the great stories of faith in light of our own experience and our own understanding of that same living God.

Such a restatement is a particular hallmark of any prophetic age, when God calls us into wider understandings of old truths and relationships in light of changing events and experience. It was, after all, the reformulation of the faith by the prophets in response to the destruction of Israel that renewed that faith. It was the restatement of the law in the life and teachings of Jesus that fulfilled that law. It was the re-interpretation of who is the faith community by Paul that laid the foundation for an inclusive and universal church.

Any such change is also accompanied by tremendous resistance and hostility by those who seek to be loyal to the old formulations. Religious institutions and leaders in particular are susceptible to this form of blindness. Jesus' complaint that the people who loudly proclaim their veneration of the prophets of old are the same people who are stoning the prophets in their midst, is no less a problem in our own age.

If we can be certain that God is asking each of us to change in our understanding, we can be less certain as to the direction of that change. Is a new direction the leading of a living God or

is it a turning away from the path that God has set before us? This, of course, is always the crucial question. For in our struggle together as a community, the debate is never between those who say we should follow the Word of God and those who say we should not - how easy that would be; but rather between those who have differing understandings of what in fact is God's Word for us. Since we know that our knowledge and our prophecy is imperfect, we cannot pretend that any of our beliefs, no matter how deeply held, are final or error-free formulations. How then do we approach change? It seems that we must always ask the same question. Does the intended change lead to a richer, deeper, more faithful understanding and experience of the God we have met in our own lives as well as in the testimony of the communities of faith throughout the ages, or does it lead to some diminished or self-serving view? This question does not always yield an immediate answer, but at least it delivers us from the meaningless spectacle of shouting Bible verses at one another and pretending that such a futile exercise is true reflection and examination.

In approaching the question of inclusive language, we need to consider the nature of the change that would take place. For what is being proposed is not merely a cosmetic change to politically mollify vociferous factions in our midst, but rather a different way of thinking, understanding, and speaking about God. Is that way a richer, deeper, more faithful one, or a diminished and self-serving one?

The members of the Inclusive Language Task Force, though representing diverse cultural and theological perspectives, are united in believing the guidelines here presented will enrich rather than diminish our faith experience. For the changes that these guidelines represent are in the interest of enlarging and expanding our understanding and experience of God. By no longer identifying God with words or concepts primarily or exclusively associated with one gender, one race, one group, we more faithfully witness to the nature of a God who is not limited to one gender, one race, or one group.

The fact that such a change is neither familiar nor comfortable for many of us does not mean that we need not expend the effort. Allowing our lives to be transformed by the power of God often involves our submitting to changes that we initially resist. The fact that such a change requires our learning to restate the traditional formulations of our faith in light of God's present Word is no less than other communities of faith have had to do before us. Indeed, to be part of such an emerging restatement of God's Word is not a burden, but a sacred privilege.

PREAMBLE

The reason we need to find and use inclusive language in our church life has been widely misunderstood. Inclusive language has often been urged upon congregations on grounds that the use of traditional, non-inclusive language upsets and angers some who then avoid the church. As Christians we need to be concerned about the feelings of others; however, if the only reason we use inclusive language is that it keeps some people from getting upset, then what of those who find the use of exclusive language disturbing because of its unfamiliarity? The principle which guides the life and practice of the church cannot be 'what do most people find comfortable,' but rather, 'what is God's will and purpose.' The reason we need to use inclusive

language is not because we want to keep a particular group happy, but because it is necessary to promote justice, reconciliation and love, the agenda to which we Christians have been called.

Because of human sin, we live in a world of division and oppression. Groups which have traditionally exercised control over other groups inevitably and often unconsciously seek to preserve that superior status by denying the same access to power and privilege to others that they themselves enjoy. Such denial may be blatant in the form of discriminatory laws or customs, or it may be hidden but even more potent in the form of oppressive concepts or language. The insidious nature of language which serves to emphasize one group as the norm or standard is that it reinforces that group's primacy and importance every time we think or speak, thus, it becomes automatic or 'natural' to ascribe greater weight to that group. Justice, reconciliation and love demand that we overcome oppression wherever it exists, and we cannot exclude the oppressive structures of our language from this task.

The use of inclusive language does more than overcome a barrier to equal access. It frees us to apprehend and convey the wider truth. Paul urges the Corinthians to widen their hearts that they might fully experience the gospel (II Cor. 6:13). In the same spirit, he might urge us to widen our understanding so that we might better grasp the richness and fullness of God as well as of our own humanity. It is our openness to move beyond comfortable and familiar images that enables us to grow in our relationship with God. The importance of inclusive language is that it serves to liberate everyone.

SECTION I

1. What is inclusiveness?

Inclusiveness is an attitude or stance of mutuality and openness towards others that recognizes everyone's right of equal access to the experience and realization of wholeness, and it is a commitment to remove barriers between individuals and among communities that deny such access.

2. What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language reflects an attitude or stance of mutuality and openness towards others that recognizes everyone's right of equal access to the experiences and realization of wholeness.

Inclusive language reflects a sensitivity to overcoming barriers that exist between individuals and among communities in such areas as gender, race, class, age, physical differences, nationality, theological beliefs, culture and lifestyle.

3. Guidelines for inclusive language regarding gender.

a. References to people.

- i) Use nongendered terms or inclusive gendered terms when referring to all sexes.

(eg. Instead of 'man' or 'mankind,' use 'human,' 'humanity,' 'humankind,' 'people,' 'all,' 'men' and
continued

women,' 'female and male.' Do not use 'brothers in Christ' or 'sons of God' or 'brotherhood,' but 'Christians,' 'friends,' 'community,' 'people of God,' 'children of God' or 'sisters and brothers.')

- ii) Pronouns should not be of a single gender when referring to all sexes.

(eg. Instead of "A Christian should read his Bible daily" use "Christians should read their Bibles daily" (plural) - "A Christian should read his or her Bible daily" (both sexes) - "A Christian should read the Bible daily" (drop the pronoun) - "The Bible should be read by Christians" (passive voice).

- iii) Terms for occupations and roles should not refer to one gender.

(eg. Do not add diminutives of 'ess' or 'ette,' as in 'priestess.' It is a diminutive and demeaning to refer to women or gay men as 'girls.' Do not use 'spokesman' or 'chairman,' but 'chairperson' or 'chair.' Do not use 'man the booth' but 'staff the booth.' Forms of address should not call attention to sex, race or nationality, but to the role: not 'women-' or 'gay-' or 'Hispanic-' minister, but 'minister.')

b. Inclusive language for God.

- i) Use nongendered or inclusive gendered terms for God wherever such improvements do not alter the fundamental meaning. If a gendered term is necessary or desirable, terms of the other gender should also be used for balance.

(Examples of nongendered terms for God: Creator, Maker, Sovereign, Holy One, Spirit, Lover, Ruler, Guide, Shepherd, Rock, Source of Life, Yahweh, the Almighty, Parent, Friend, Most High.)

- ii) Balance male images for God with female images.

(eg. Nurturer, the Breast One, Mother, Midwife, Mother Eagle or Hen.)

- iii) Where possible, replace pronouns with nongendered nouns or use balanced gendered pronouns or words such as 'who,' 'whom,' 'one' and 'Godself.'

c. Inclusive language for Jesus the Christ.

The historical person, Jesus, was male. "The historical fact that Jesus was male affirms not that God chose to become incarnate with masculine characteristics, but that Jesus was truly human as well as truly divine. And because Jesus incorporates the humanity of both men and women, it is appropriate" . . . to emphasize the full humanity by minimizing the use of male pronouns. (*page 21, *All May Be One: A guide to Inclusive Church Language*, The Task Force on Women, Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, Minneapolis, Minnesota 1979.)

- d. The task force recommends as options the use of direct address, adjectives and verbs to replace nouns or pronouns in dealing with inclusive language, carefully considering whether meaning or purpose would be adversely changed.

(eg. Change "He's got the whole world in His hands" to "You've got the whole world in Your hands.")

4. Guidelines for inclusive language regarding race.

If we are indeed going to be an inclusive church, we must acknowledge that we are the products of our past. Incorporated within our Christian religious heritage is a long history of racism (conscious or unconscious). Racism, whether conscious or unconscious, is destructive and must be overcome in order for us to be whole in our Christian faith. So, in keeping with our guideline for inclusivity, we strongly recommend the elimination of racist language, imagery and symbols in references to people, God, Jesus Christ, scripture, hymns, songs, liturgy and contemporary language.

(eg. We recommend not using language which suggests that white is the preferred color, such as "wash me white as snow." Instead, use "pure as hope" or "free of sin." Instead of "pearly white gates" use "heavenly gates" and instead of "robes of pure white" use "spotless robes." We discourage the exclusive use of dark colors in liturgical attire to indicate death or mourning and we discourage the exclusive use of white to indicate joy or life. The best solution is to show that on the authority of the Bible black and darkness can be positive symbols - symbols of the divine and of goodness.)

The task force had a problem dealing with the separation of the issues of pigmentation (white, black) and illumination (light, dark). Because of its racism, society has so strongly interwoven the two. In a technical and a theological sense they are indeed separate issues whereas, in their practical application, they are often combined. We need to be especially mindful of how we use terms of lightness and darkness.

5. The relation of inclusive language to the life and worship of the church.

The above guidelines should be applied when reading translations of scripture, in hymns, songs and liturgy, and in contemporary language.

6. We recommend that the guidelines of this commission be similarly developed for each of the languages which UFMCC congregations speak.

7. The task force recommends that inclusive language be introduced in membership classes of local congregations as an area of discussion and education.

8. The task force recommends that these guidelines be applied at all levels of the life of UFMCC, both in written, visual and spoken form, on the local, national and international levels.



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9. The task force recommends that at all UFMCC functions at the local, national and international level, all participants, to include outside guests, be informed of these guidelines.

10. The task force recommends that the UFMCC Department of Christian Education revise and develop materials using these guidelines, including production of a packet and study guide for use in studying inclusive language.

11. The task force recommends that the UFMCC commission a body to provide us with an inclusive scripture that incorporates these guidelines. In the meantime, great care should be taken in applying these guidelines to scripture.

12. The task force recommends to the Ministerial Credentials and Affairs Committee that in evaluating ministers it include an opportunity for the candidates to demonstrate their readiness to use inclusive language.

13. The task force recommends that these guidelines be applied to the work of the Hymnody Committee.

14. The task force recommends that UFMCC use the name of the month and day in giving dates, since order varies among countries when only numerals are used (eg. 6/2/80 can be June 2 or February 6). Also, seasonal references should be eliminated, and months used instead (eg. not 'Fall Session' but 'September Session').

SECTION II

15. Recommendations for Statement of Faith.

UFMCC Bylaws, Article III: Doctrine, Sacraments and Rites.

A. Doctrine: Christianity is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and is the religion set forth in the Scriptures. *Jesus Christ is foretold in the Old Testament, presented in the New Testament, and proclaimed by the Christian Church in every age and in every land.*

Founded in the interest of offering a church home to all who confess and believe, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches moves in the mainstream of Christianity.

Our faith is based upon the principles outlined in the historic creeds: Apostles' and Nicene.

We believe:

1. *In one triune God, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, of one substance and of three persons: God - our Parent-Creator; Jesus - begotten of God, God in flesh, human; and the Holy Spirit - God as our sustainer.*

2. That the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, showing forth God to every person through the law and the prophets, and finally, completely and ultimately on earth in the being of Jesus Christ.

3. That Jesus . . . the Christ . . . historically recorded as living some 2,000 years before this writing, *is God incarnate, of human birth, fully God and fully human, and that by being one with the will of God, Jesus has demonstrated once and forever that all people are likewise Children of God, being spiritually made in God's image.*

4. That the Holy Spirit is God making known God's love and interest to all people. The Holy Spirit is God, available to and working through all who are willing to place their welfare in God's keeping.

5. Every person is justified by Grace to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

6. We are saved from loneliness, despair and degradation through God's gift of grace, as was declared by our *Saviour*. Such grace is not earned, but is a pure gift from a God of pure love. We further commend the *community* of the faithful to a life of prayer; to seek genuine forgiveness for unkind, thoughtless and unloving acts; and to a committed life of Christian service.

7. The Church serves to bring all people to God through Christ. To this end, it shall arrange for regular services of worship, prayer, interpretation of the Scriptures, and edification through the teaching and preaching of the Word.

B. Sacraments: This church embraces two holy Sacraments:

1. Baptism by water and the Spirit, as recorded in the Scriptures, shall be a sign of the dedication of each life to God and God's service. Through the words and acts of this sacrament, the recipient is identified as God's own Child.

2. Holy Communion is the partaking of blessed bread and wine in accordance with *the words of Jesus*: "This is my body . . . this is my blood." (Matthew 26:26-28)

All who believe, confess and repent and seek God's love through Christ, after examining their consciences, may freely participate in the communal meal, signifying their desire to be received into *community with Jesus Christ*, to be saved by *Jesus Christ's* sacrifice, to participate in *Jesus Christ's* resurrection, and to commit their lives anew to *the service of Jesus Christ*.

